June 1990. Rochester, New York. A new group has been formed to work to eliminate state statute 245.01 of the penal code. This law requires women but not men to cover their chests in public. (An exception is made for women who are nursing or "entertaining".)

Five women founded the group out of dissatisfaction with working in the old so-called Coalition of Topfree Equality. The five were among seven persons who regularly attended Coalition planning meetings; and were among the ten women arrested in the 1989 action. (That case is being appealed.)

Among reasons for the establishment of the new organization are: the women see shirtfree equality as a women's rights issue, and want the issue put forth undiluted and undenied; they would like to see the group be women-directed (while welcoming feminist men's support); they are disallowing nudist agenda; they are hoping for not only tolerance, but welcoming of discussion and dissension within the group, as new directions and tactics are considered.

Group processes in the old Coalition had deteriorated to the point that little trust was left amongst memebers. People at meetings had unequal opportunities to speak. Group decisions were not honored. There was little space for considering revising old structures.

Beginning with the original "Topfree Seven" planning, arrest, and subsequent defense, many women have been at odds with the muddling of their agenda with nudist concerns and strategies. There were a number of nudist-related testimonies in the "7 Case". The lawyers insisted the women include 1st amendment plea in their defense. A very important issue for all, free speech, and with particular applications for nudists, but it does not address equal rights for women.

Feminist and attorney Sharon Sayers was asked and agreed to defend 8 of the 10 in the 1989 case. She expressed a desire to keep the case simply focussed on Equal Rights. Period.

Marylou Schloss chose to defend herself. Again, a nudist witness was flown into town to help further the cause. Whose cause?

George Harker, the witness, summed it up succinctly in conversation outside the courtroom after his testimony (which included how nudism was becoming more widely acceptable). Wouldn't you rather have all of it? he suggested, refe rring to clothing optional recreation -- as if women's rights is a parcel of this larger package of going nude.

"This is not a women's rights issue," Morley Schloss stated emphatically at a late May meeting of the Coalition.

Group members don't want to spend energy re-hashing old business, but want to make it known to friends and supporters of equal rights that most of them got tired of too much compromise and railroading. The old group's functioning contained too many elements antithetical to precisely what it espoused to want to do: enable women to have some control over their lives; give women opportunities to speak out; create space where women's perceptions are respected and honored; raise questions about prevailing modes of operation; and encourage questioning of the "old ways". ((Radical women know too well how the status quo is established in groups conceived to challenge the status quo.)

Group members will continue to explore through discussion and actions ways to point out the harm caused by this and other discriminations against women, and seek to change the inequities.

As more women see/feel/KNOW the connections between a law dictating how women dress (i.e., how women "have to be") and the overall oppression of and discrimination against women -- and ultimately all discrimination of "other" -- more will join/support in this fight for justice.